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## Laugh and Learn: Evaluating from Students' Perspective of Humor Used in English Class

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**Abstract:** Laughter is an easily reachable way that can be used to erase barriers of communication for educational purposes. The purpose of this paper is to seek out students' perception of humor added in teaching English and how that humor influenced students' engagement in English classroom activity. This study employs research instrument of questionnaire and observation concepts through qualitative design. There are 78 students of multi-background: gender, level of intelligence and social background as research participants. These backgrounds are intended to obtain objective perception of the students. The findings revealed that the majority of students believed the teacher's humor could prevent them from feeling stress of learning English, develop a better relationship between teacher and students, help them remember and understand the lesson, encourage them to be more active in the classroom and ease them in learning English. However there are some obstacles to overcome during humor application that apparently the English teachers need to build a good relationship and mutual trust with students and understand students' interests, likes and dislikes prior to applying humor, so that the humor would be more likely to be welcomed and it would not cause emotional and psychological impact such as bullying and etc for the students.

**Keywords:** Humor; perceptions; teaching English; education; learning environment

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## INTRODUCTION

There are certain humors that can be unsuitable based on individual perception. Susan (2013) revealed that deleterious humor generated the relationship crack among teacher and students which made students reluctance or fear to partake in the learning process as well as lack of attention in class while encouraging humor leads to attention, easiness and serenity. Furthermore, Gruner, (2017); McGhee (2014) mentions that sarcastic humor is considered as not appropriate to use in learning environment. There is a clear line between playful and

offensive kidding. The implementation of humor in education is not a new thing for educators. Many researchers (Bergen, 1992; Buck, 2005; Frymier, Wanzer, & Wojtaszczyk, 2008; Morrison, 2008; Pham, 2014) proved that humor created a healthy learning environment. Humor is very necessary for teaching and learning in order to motivate and attract student's attention (Aboudan, 2009). Mary (2008) defined that humor has many benefits such as maximizes brain power, contributes to mind or body balance, improves creativity, facilitates communication, and creates an optimal environment for teaching and learning.

Recent research by Rima (2009), Mary (2008), Hoang (2014) and Antonio (2001) reveal that by added some humor in class would help the students to have a better understanding in learning a new language (Aboudan, 2009; Morrison, 2008; Munoz, 2005; Pham, 2014; Tosta, 2001). Laughter is an easily reachable tool that can be used to erase barriers of communication for educational purposes (Galindo, 2012). Glenn (2003) also said that these barriers included the absence of information retention, lack of attention in the subject at hand, and an uncomfortable learning atmosphere.

However, There have been fewer studies that focused on students' perception toward humor in the classroom (Morrison, 2008; Olajoke, 2013; Pham, 2014). Nevertheless, one research was carried out under general education by Hoang (2014). In addition, Susan(2013) focused the study on students' perception toward the use of humor in teaching English. Both teachers and student have a point of view about inappropriate humor. Embarrassment, sarcasm, and ridicule are kinds of prohibit humor in the classroom (Bruner, 2009; Ivy, 2013; Mayo, 2008; McCreaddie & Harrison, 2018). Nancy (2009) says that in order to help language instructors make sense of humor and choose suitable examples to use in their classrooms, researchers have suggested several forms of humor and made recommendations for the proper levels of learners with which each type might be used (Frymier et al., 2008; Morrison, 2008; Pham, 2014; Strong, 2013; Tosta, 2001). Nancy (2009) divided humor into three categories, universal humor or humor that general person understand, culture-based humor, which depended on the culture of a person, and linguistic humor or verbal jokes. He claimed that elementary-level students could benefit from the use of the first type, intermediate students appreciate universal humor and some types of culture-based jokes, and advanced students could benefit and appreciate all three types.

Even though there are countless of prominent benefits of humor, it is important to gain a greater understanding in what manner humor operates in the classroom from the student's perception (Davenport, 2015). It turned out there is a few study to look at students opinion towards humor in English learning class, therefore this study would fill in this gap.

### **Humor in Education and Teaching English**

Humor frequently used as an indicator for the identification of talented students (Morrison, 2008). Marlon (2008) and Mebarka (2012) have somehow involved the use of humor in foreign language teaching suggest a series of positive outcomes in second language learning. Marlon (2008) mentioned that the mediating role of humor between second language students and the target language prompted by humorous collaborative narratives that emphasized playing with sounds and different meanings of words. (Berk, 2002; Fovet, 2009; Galindo, 2012; Morreall, 2014) revealed that humor had many benefits for teaching learning process. Some of those benefits stated that humor could reduce tension, helped to understand the subject, and made the class more active. An information presented by humor could last longer (Zebila, 2012).

Researchers have presented the use of humor might affect learner motivation and classroom atmosphere (Morrison, 2008; Pham, 2014). Humor has the power to make instructors more amiable and approachable, assist comprehension, increase concentration, improve creativity, and promote social relationships (Lei, Cohen, & Russler, 2010). Humor in English classroom is not only as a tool to produce laughter but also increase students' motivation and self-confidence to enhance their language acquisition (Zebila, 2012). Vescio, Ross, & Adams (2008) mentioned that students who have best school experiences usually provided by teachers who used strategies that encourage the bond between humor and learning. Using humor can be a successful teaching tool for its

humanizing effect on teacher image (Garner, 2006; Zillmann & Bryant, 2014). Students feel valued and motivated because of their humorous and humanistic teachers encouraged the situation where positive communication arose (Zebila, 2012).

## **Humor Perceptions**

Susan (2013) said that it was not arguable that humor and culture were interlinked in any language which made different languages brought different humor perception. Inferring meaning from humor should base on the cultural understanding of the environment. Susan (2013) also said that English teachers were likely to perform humor with carefulness in teaching English and some English teachers might not worry for fear of being misunderstood.

There are several reasons why not many teachers employ humor in their class. They believe that humor seems too personal for the classroom, where there is a group of individual with different views of humor. Hence, they fear they might simply insult someone. Another reason is that some people see the use of humor as something that could lead to discipline problems, and, as consequence, to the teacher's loss control of the class. Some argue that humor is time consuming, increases teacher's talking time, and could raise learner dependence. Another common reason is skepticism in the seriousness of humor. The idea of the teacher as a performer may not sound professional to some of us (Tosta, 2001). Elderly people usually have a different sense of humor with younger people in terms of styles, comprehension, and appreciation of humor because they live in a different era, with different cultures, varying levels of education, different idols, and so on (Martin, 2010). However, Halula (2013) claims that humor can be used in any classroom by any teacher of any subject no matter the age level, subject matter or ethnic background as long as it for the benefit of any student.

## **METHOD**

In term to assess students' view toward humor in English class, this research was guided by the following questions: How do students receive humor added in teaching English? This is a teaching research article which contributes to study the students' perception in learning English through humor added by English teacher. In dealing with this research design, the method employed is a qualitative research in which demands a researcher to find explanations of peculiar phenomena in real world where the researcher was prohibited to manipulate the outcomes from the phenomena.

As research instrument, the researcher applied questionnaire and observation guidelines. The researcher gained the data from 78 (48 male and 30 female) of second graders of two senior high schools in Banda Aceh. The students are in heterogeneous group; gender, level of intelligence, and social family background. Multi-background is aimed to reveal natural and objective perceptions of the students towards the humor. There are four English teachers who added humor during English class based on initial study of the researcher.

The questionnaire is adapted from Susan (2013) which comprises of statement strongly agree, agree, neutral, strongly disagree, and disagree meanwhile the observation sheet is modified from (Nguyen, 2014). It is merely assumed that the questionnaire objectiveness is to obtain the students' perceptions towards the English teacher who uses humor in English class meanwhile an observation needed in order to make sure that the teacher uses humor in English learning and to find out how the students respond when the teacher uses the humor.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

The students gave their perceptions about a teacher who used humor in teaching English in the classroom. The questionnaire

items divided into three groups: the use of English and humor, the benefits of humor, and the perception on humor. There were 15 students (19%) are high achievers, 51 students (66%) had average achiever and 12 students (15%) are low achievers in using English for communication. It is merely implied that the majority of the students are able to use English for simple communication. It is revealed that 72 students (92%) claimed that their teacher used a lot of humor in teaching English while only 6 students (8%) thought that the teacher used a few number of humor in teaching. None of the students stated that the teacher did not use a single humor in teaching English.

It is shown that on item of questionnaire “humor reduces stress” all of 78 students (100%) believed humor could relief stress in learning English. All of the students agreed that humor could bridge the gap between the teachers and students. In other word, humor is an effective tool to make students and teachers not only just as students and teachers, but also as a learning environment where they can exchange ideas and opinions. On item of questionnaire of “humor helps students to remember the lesson”, the researcher discovered 69 students (89%) agreed with this statement, and 9 students (11%) did not agree with it. The data might imply that most of students agreed they needed humor to help them memorize the subject. Next, on item “humor creates an enjoyable learning atmosphere” all of the participants agreed with this statement accordingly. Then, the result of the statement that “humor engages students’ participation in classroom” it is shown that 66 students (84%) agreed humor motivated their engagement and attendance in class, meanwhile 12 students (16%) chose “disagree” towards this statement. It means most of these students have more keenness to learn a lesson when the teacher is fun.

Item of “humor mainly promotes students’ active participation” described that all participants (100%) agreed with the statement. They believed that appropriate

humor does not only make the class fun but also it encourages students to be more active in learning process. It made the class more effective and the teacher knew in which learning is presumably quite challenging. Then, the questionnaire result from item “humor eases English learning” demonstrated 72 students (92%) were agreed with the statement which said humor eases them to understand the lesson. Only six students (8%) did not agree with this statement. It could be comprehended that they would likely to comprehend the lesson better with humorous teacher.

The result on questionnaire item “relevance of humor” demonstrated that all twenty six participants (100%) said “Yes” related to the relevance of humor in teaching English. The researcher implied that all participants thought humor were relevant or suitable in teaching English. The questionnaire item of “understanding humor in English” showed to us that 15 students (20%) do not understand the humor added in English class on the other hand, it is about 63 students (80%) understand the humor used when studying English. Based on the researcher’s observation, all participants get sense of humor better in their first language and the teacher added humor in students’ first language (*Bahasa Indonesia*). The reason was not farfetched as students were in their first language environment and used their first language in most communicative acts.

Questionnaire item of “humorous teacher as a clown, comedian or funny teacher” asked about student’s perception towards humor used by English teacher. Three categories were available to choose, teacher who used humor perceived as a clown, a comedian and/or a funny teacher. The result was about 75 students (96%) perceived a humorous teacher as a funny teacher. Only three students (4%) perceived the teacher as a comedian. The majority of the students could distinguish between a clown, a comedian, or a funny teacher. There is also a possibility the learners might not have the

sufficient semantic knowledge of such words distinction.

The next questionnaire is “humor creates gap between teacher and students” which focused on what was student’s opinion regarding the negative implication of humor in learning English. Three negative statements presented for the students to choose “Yes” or “No”. The first statement stated humor made gaps in student-teacher relationship. The second statement stated humor was a symbol of disrespect. The last statement was humor could create rejections on some of students. All participants chose “No” with the first statement. They strongly believed humor bridged the gap instead made a distance between teacher and student interactions. 69 students (88%) did not believe humor could lead disrespect. At the same time there were 9 students (12%) believed humor could lead disrespect. The result from item 8(c) demonstrated no participant believed humor could lead withdrawal from students. Instead, they surely agreed that humor could make students more interested in learning English.

Item of “students recommend the use of humor in English class” focused on discovered students’ opinion on the recommendation of using humor in teaching English. There are 75 students (96%) were strongly recommended the use of humor in teaching English and only one student did not recommended it. In addition, item of “students prefer Indonesian to English humor in class” focused on student’s opinion about humor in their first language and in English. The majority of students (66 students or 84%) claimed that they understand humor in *Bahasa Indonesia* better than in English. 12 students (16%) chose “No” which possibly meant they understand humor in both language or not understand humor completely in both languages. According to (Berk, 2002; Fovet, 2009; Galindo, 2012; Morreall, 2014), it is implied that the use of humor in teaching English is strongly necessary as students expressed this by agreeing the use of humor reduce stress (100%), bridges the gap between teachers and students (100%), helps

to remember the lesson (89%), makes the class become attractive (100%), Encourage student’s attendance in class (84%), makes the class more active (100%), to ease studying (92%) and helps to understand the lesson (92%). This finding supported theory by (Askildson, 1992; Olajoke, 2013; Pojoga, Marici, & Pojoga, 2015; Tosta, 2001) reported that humor could give a good impression for the teacher among students.

In this questionnaire, the students were asked to convey their views on negative implications of humor in order not to be silent on negative humor. Most of the students were highly did not believe humor could lead on negative consequence as in the case of distance between teachers and students (100%), disrespect (88%), and withdrawal of students (100%). The researcher noted that 12% of participants believed humor could lead disrespect by the students. The researcher noticed that the most frequent humor the teacher used was humorous comment (ten times), followed by visual humor (five times) and pun (two times). The table also mentions humorous comment often happened in classroom interactions. Visual humor frequently related to lesson content and pun humor occurred in both materials and lesson content.

It is revealed that there is no student gave negative respond towards teacher’s humor and only three times students gave neutral reaction or they were not entertained by the humor. The rest reactions were positive reactions or in other word the students were entertained by the humor. In addition, the teacher has a unique way of correcting student’s error. It is shown during observation that when a student is confused to distinguish countable or uncountable from the word “grandmother”, the student asked the teacher about the word. The teacher smiled and asked other students “anyone here has uncountable grandma?” The Whole students laughed and it somehow made the confused student laughed too and realized that the word “grandmother” was a countable noun without any further question or explanation from the teacher. The

teacher describe noun “pen” with singing a popular funny music video called “pen pineapple apple pen” which directly laughed by students because they knew very well about the song.

The students asked a lot of question during the group activity. Sometimes the teacher looks overwhelmed and happy at the same time. The teacher also expressed some humor when several students struggle to ask at the same time. The teacher responds it with a humorous comment for instances, why use any? Is Ani here?“, don’t start bloodshed, ask one by one”. The students laughed and asked the question orderly. The teacher expressed humor mostly in Indonesian such as *nenek yang tak terhitung* (uncountable grandma), and *jangan memulai pertumpahan darah* (Do not start bloodshed).

The analysis of the questionnaires indicated that 92% of students apprised a teacher who used humor in teaching English as a good teacher. Zebila (2012) stated that students became excited to attend the class for a long time, and feel attracted in what being said by the teacher when teacher was used humor. The majority of participants (66%) claimed that they had average ability in English, which could be interpreted that they did not feel confident to use English in daily activities. Such a theory proposed by Alptekin (2002), stated that native languages commonly used for daily interactions in their particular area while English was used for representative and national functions. There are two major languages in Banda Aceh, Indonesian and Acehnese languages. Therefore, the majority of students in Banda Aceh have acquired one or more language before learning English language. This finding supported theory by (Askildson, 1992; Olajoke, 2013; Pojoga et al., 2015; Tosta, 2001) reported that humor could give a good impression for the teacher among students.

In addition, Cann, Stilwell, & Taku, (2010); White (2001) stated that a teacher who used humor promoted a healthy learning environment. Shibinski & Martin (2010) declared humor could enhance the teacher-

student relationship. Students felt more comfortable to interact with funny teacher rather than non-humorous teacher because they could express their original feeling easier to the funny teacher who usually more welcome to them. In addition, Alex (2012) and Ronald (2002) proclaimed a theory about the barriers that exist between students and teachers could be broken down by developing a true friendship between the two parties involved (teacher and students) by using a tool called humor.

Shibinski & Martin (2010); Pojoga et al. (2015) stated that sometimes students have a problem to remember what they have had learned from the subject lesson. They stated that this problem caused by the high level of stress students faced when they learn subject lesson especially the difficult one. Many factors could create a high level of stress learning atmosphere. the common factors were students boredom and lack of humor in class (Pham, 2014; Pojoga et al., 2015; Tosta, 2001; Wallinger, 1997). Further theories by (Makewa, 2011; Munoz, 2005; Pham, 2014) stated that humor made the class more attractive. According to them, when a teacher used humor in teaching-learning process, it made students paid more attention to the subject rather than busy with something beyond learning a lesson.

It is shown that students surely agreed that humor were important and relevant with English language learning (100%). The researcher found that 80% of participants understand the humor when it was delivered in English language. The majority the students presumed a humorous teacher as a funny teacher (96%). In accordance with the researcher’s observation, some students were a little bit confused to distinguish between a clown and a comedian. The students might not have the sufficient semantic knowledge of such words difference. After the researcher gave some explanations, they apprehended the meaning of those words.

In addition the students were asked to convey their views on negative implications of humor added in teaching English. Most of

the students did not believe humor could lead on negative consequence as in the case of distance between teachers and students (100%), disrespect (88%), and withdrawal of students (100%). The researcher noted that 12% of participants were believed humor could lead disrespect by the students. Such an idea has been discussed by (Morrison, 2008; Olajoke, 2013) which said that the teachers are the major determinant factor when it comes to negative humor. Hence, negative implications such as distance and disrespect might emerge when a humor attacks the personality or ethnic group of the students. (Pham, 2014; Samson & Meyer, 2010) recommended teachers not to use sarcastic or negative humor because if the students did not understand the humor, it could lead to negative outcomes such as students got offended or shamed and lack of class participation.

The significance of the humor in the classroom is increasingly known as a way of defusing unfriendliness and encouraging cooperation and learning (Wallinger, 1997). Goel & Dolan (2007); McGhee (2014) also stated that humor increased social integration and solidarity among students. In addition Bekelja Wanzer, Bainbridge Frymier, Wojtaszczyk, & Smith (2006); Wanzer, Frymier, & Irwin (2010) claimed that humor grants peace during stressful situation and gives a sense of freedom and optimism that encourage creativity.

As a matter of fact, most of the participants (80%) claimed that they understand humor added in teaching of English language. It is not an elusive reason considering that the students learn better in stress-free environment (Tosta, 2001). Meanwhile, 95% of participants really recommend the use of humor in teaching of English language. Therefore, teachers must do much homework to invest some humor into the learning process to create an effective learning of the language. At the same time, teachers also have obligations to equip the students with skills that would make them understand humor related to English culture

as the findings discovered that 84% of students understand humor better in their first language than in English. The reasons behind these findings are caused by students who accustomed in their first language atmosphere and rarely used English in daily conversation (Hoang, 2014). Based on the researcher's observation, the teacher thought about countable and uncountable noun by showing some pictures about countable and uncountable things on the whiteboard. The teacher asked questions for the students what were the names of things on the whiteboard. The students raised their hand to answer the question from the teacher and gave the right names of the things. The teacher also helped the students to find the names of things they did not know.

The teacher showed the group of countable and uncountable things to the students. At the same time, the teacher explained why the things called countable and uncountable noun. Some students asked the teachers about some other daily things they did not know it were countable or uncountable noun. The teacher gave the example with some humorous comment related to the name of things in English.

The researcher counted a great deal of humor used by the teacher. Most of it was humorous comment (ten times), but there was also puns (twice) and visual humor (five times). In the case of humorous comments, seven were on classroom interactions with students, two were on the lesson content, and one was on the material. In the case of puns, one was on the classroom interaction and the other one on the lesson content. Visual humor took two times on materials and three times on the lesson content.

The teacher had a high tone of sound in a good way, which the students surely could hear her loudly and clearly. Her humor was expressed throughout the lesson, not on any specific proportion. The teacher also had an easy-going style of teaching with less proportion of the complicated theory and more examples provided to the students. According to Hoang (2014), most of foreign

language teachers were used humor throughout the class time, but most frequently at the beginning as 'icebreakers' to set a relaxed mood for the lesson, and at the end of the lesson to refresh students after they might have been worn out with their study. The students were welcomed the humor. The researcher noted that only three neutral reactions from the students out of twelve positive reactions including collective laughter from the students. Sometimes the teacher found distracted students and she handled them with humor too. As the consequences, that student laughed and started to pay attention again to the lesson. When the teacher gave a group exercise for the students, she also contributed to the class as a facilitator by visiting every group in the class. As the result, all students in the group worked together and finished the exercise with happy faces.

Recent research in psychology has shown that young children were not only susceptible to humor but they also actively produced humor themselves (Norrick & Chiaro, 2009). Humor contributed to shape an optimal learning environment. Learning thrived when there were fun, laughter and teachers with sense of humor (Morrison, 2008). When a teacher wanted to deliver a serious point in teaching, it would be best to deliver right after the students laugh (Makewa, 2011). The teacher that the researcher observes has a unique way of correcting student's error. The researcher observed when a student confused to distinguish countable or uncountable from the word "grandmother", the student asked the teacher about the word. The teacher smile and asked other students "anyone here has uncountable grandma?" The Whole students laughed and it somehow made the confused student laughed too and realized that the word "grandmother" is a countable noun without any further question or explanation from the teacher. The students asked a lot of question during the group activity. Sometimes she looks overwhelmed and happy at the same time. She also throws some humor when several students struggle to ask at the same

time. The teacher respond it with a humorous comment "don't start a bloodshed, ask one by one". The students laughed and asked the question orderly.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

It is shown that the majority of students tend to believe that the teacher's humor could prevent them from the stress of learning English, develop a better relationship between teacher and students, help them remember and understand the lesson, encourage them to be more active in the classroom, and ease them in learning English.

Students found a humorous teacher is friendly and energetic. At the same time, the students respect the teacher. Almost all students recommended the teacher to use humor when teaching English. They considered a teacher with sense of humor as a funny teacher, not a comedian, or a clown. It has educational benefits drawn from this research in which enhancing teacher's awareness on the use of humor in teaching by investigating the perceptions and opinions of students and serving as guidelines for English language teachers to avoid wrong implementation of humor in classroom. Furthermore as recommendation of this study the researcher recommends due to the small size of population in the present study and it is not enough to generalize the findings to the entire population of all English students since the research covers a particular institution in Aceh. It is best to gather general and large participants in the future. Finally, a careful exploration of English teachers' perception on the use of humor in English teaching is advised then we would compare the study between students' and teachers' perceptions toward the humor added in English teaching class.

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